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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted whose primary objective was to examine the relationship between mothers' responses to children's intentions and children's development of moral reasoning. It was hypothesized that children of mothers who responded positively to their child's positive intent and negatively to their child's negative intent would use intent information to a greater extent in making moral judgments than would children whose parents did not respond differentially to intent. A secondary objective was to replicate, with children younger than those typically studied, the often-reported finding that with an increase in age, children display an increase in consideration of intentions underlying an act and a decrease in consideration of outcomes. A total of 72 preschool children ranging in age from 4.5 to 6.5 years were read stories designed for balance between consequences and intentions; following stories, children responded nonverbally by symbolically rewarding or punishing the story character. In a separate session, subjects' mothers completed a questionnaire on which they chose phrases describing their usual responses when their children's intentions resulted in negative consequences. Results indicated that children's use of intent information in making moral judgments did increase with age. Mothers were found to respond differentially to older and younger children with respect to use of positive intent and, regardless of the child's age, to respond with disapproval when negative intentions were displayed. (RH)

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Maternal Influences on Preschoolers' Use of Intent in Moral Reasoning[1]

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[1]Paper presented in part at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development in Detroit, April, 1983

ABSTRACT

Seventy-two children ranging from 4.5-6.5 years of age were given stories to assess their moral reasoning. Mothers of these children were asked to indicate typical feelings and behaviors they displayed following their children's demonstration of positive versus negative intentions which resulted in negative outcomes. Subjects' responses to a simplified nonverbal moral judgment measure in which positive and negative intent were paired with positive and negative consequences indicated that use of intent information in making moral judgments increased with increasing age. More importantly, results of the maternal measures suggested that mothers responded differentially to older and younger children with respect to use of positive intent. The older the child, the more positively the mother responded to positive intentions, even when they were associated with negative consequences. Mothers responded with disapproval when negative intentions were displayed by their children, regardless of the child's age. In situations in which positive intent was displayed, mothers appeared to monitor their reactions according to the developmental level of their child. Results are discussed in terms of a bi-directional view of mother-child interaction.

Maternal Influences on Preschoolers'

Use of Intent in Moral Reasoning

The primary objective of this investigation was to examine the relationship between mothers' responses to children's intentions and the development of children's moral reasoning. Several investigators (Baumrind, 1971; Hoffman, 1976; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967) have reported a relationship between parents' discipline style and children's responsibility-taking, conscience development, and concern for others. In this study, we focused on a very specific facet of moral development that has been frequently studied: children's use of intent information in making moral judgments.

The unique aspect of this study was that the children's mothers were asked to indicate how they typically responded to their child's intent in situations in which the child's actions resulted in negative consequences. Our major hypothesis was that children of mothers who responded positively to their child's positive intent and negatively to their child's negative intent would use intent information to a greater extent in making moral judgments than would children whose parents did not respond differentially to their intent.

A secondary objective was to replicate, with younger children than those typically studied, the often reported finding that with an increase in age, children display an increase in their considerations of intentions underlying an act and a decrease in their considerations of outcomes (cf., Keasy, 1977; Roberts & Dunston, 1980). An attempt was made to use very simple and clear stories so that children as young as four might have the best possible chance of demonstrating use of intent information, if indeed, they could do so.

Although we used the Piagetian (Piaget, 1932) story paradigm to measure children's use of intent information, we were careful to construct the stories in such a way as to overcome the well-documented methodological weaknesses in Piaget's approach (Berg-Cross, 1975). More specifically, our moral judgment stories were designed to meet requirements of balance between consequences and intentions, and clarity and simplicity of material. We employed a nonverbal response format which permitted choices along a continuum rather than one which forced the child to respond to either intentions or consequences alone.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-two preschool children, 24 at each of three age levels--4.5 (range 4-1 to 4-11), 5.5 (range 5-0 to 5-11), and 6.5 (range 6-0 to 6-10) years--and their mothers were employed as subjects in the study. The children were from nursery and elementary schools in the small towns and rural areas in north-central Indiana.

Procedure

The procedures used were adapted from those previously developed by other investigators. The story (see below) was taken from the study by Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, and Farnhill (1973), who used it to assess moral reasoning of children 5 to 9 years of age. They suggested it could be given to children younger than kindergarten age. One advantage of their procedure is that it entails presenting a single story at a time for the child's consideration, instead of the traditional Piagetian story-pair (cf., Berg-Cross, 1975). A second advantage is that social consequences, rather than material consequences, were used to facilitate non-differential descriptions of intention and consequence information (cf., Armsby, 1971). Costanzo et al. presented the child with stories with only one combination

of intent and consequence information; however, we presented each child with the four possible combinations (A, B, C and D) of intent and consequence information: A(PI:PC), B(PI:NC), C(NI:PC) and D(NI:NC). These four conditions occurred equally often in the first, second, third, or fourth positions for subjects in each age group (ABCD, BCDA, CDAB, or DABC). In addition, within each of these four conditions, the order of presentation of positive, negative, intention, and consequence information was varied (with appropriate changes in wording). The children were asked to pretend they were the main story character and to retell each story until they could remember all the information about intentions and consequences (cf., Austin, Ruble, and Trabasso, 1977; Keasey, 1977). It was thought that having the children retell the stories would reduce the effects of order. The two intention and two consequence paragraphs from which the stories were constructed were:

> (PI) Positive intention.--Michael was playing in the toy room. He noticed that the toys were in a big mess and decided to straighten them up. He emptied the toy box onto the floor in order to sort and arrange the toys properly.
>
> (NI) Negative intention.--Michael was playing in the toy room. He was feeling very cross that day so he decided to mess up all the toys. He emptied the toy box onto the floor in order to scatter the toys around.

The two consequence paragraphs were:

> (PC) Positive consequences.--Just then Mrs. Green came into the room and said, "Thank you, Michael; I was just going to straighten the toy box, and you have gotten the job off to a good start."
>
> (NC) Negative consequences.--Just then Mrs. Green came into the room and said, "Oh, Michael. We're going to have company in a few minutes and now you've messed the room all up."

Before presenting the stories, each child was told he or she was going to hear a story "about a boy named Michael" (or, "about a girl named Michele," if the subject were a girl). Michael (or Michele) was

described as being a very different little boy on different days--he had good and bad days, and sometimes he got into trouble with his parents and on other days he got along well with his parents. The children were asked if they ever felt good some days, bad on others, and got into trouble on some days and not on others. After some brief discussion of their good and bad days, the children were told that they would get a chance to reward Michael (Michele) when they thought he deserved it, with either one (a small reward) or two (a larger reward) happy faces; and they could punish Michael (Michele) when they thought he deserved it, by giving him (her) one or two unhappy faces (after Weiner and Peter, 1973).

Responses to the stories were coded on a four-point scale: a score of one indicated the greatest possible punishment, a score of two indicated milder punishment, a score of three was indicative of mild reward, and a score of four indicated the greatest possible reward. The results of a pretraining exercise revealed that all subjects understood how to use the happy and unhappy faces to administer reward and punishment to the story characters.

In a separate session, the mothers of children were given a questionnaire which presented four situations in which a child's positive or negative intentions (two of each) consistently resulted in negative consequences. The mother was asked to choose phrases which most accurately described what she usually (1) feels, (2) does, and (3) says in instances in which her child's behavior results in such negative outcomes. Five possible responses on each of the three continuums were provided. The choices ranged from feeling very upset (score of 1) to very good inside (score of 5); from punishing the child (score of 1) to rewarding him/her (score of 5); and from scolding the child (score of 1) to praising him/her (score of 5). The following example is an item which deals with the child's

demonstration of positive intent (PI:NC):

"When my child attempts to clean up his toys, but just makes a bigger mess, I...."

Results and Discussion

Children's Responses

Preliminary analyses revealed no effects for story nor for order of presentation of intent and consequence information within age groups or between ages. Interestingly, the children uniformly tended to retell the stories with intent stated first and the consequences second regardless of the way they were originally presented.

A 3(age) x 2(intent) x 2(consequence) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the last two factors revealed the expected main effects for each variable (Intent-$F = 153.88$, $df = 1, 69$, $p < .01$); (Consequence-$F = 225.08$, $df = 1, 69$, $p < .01$); (Age-$F = 19.57$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .01$). A significant age x intent interaction ($F = 25.62$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .01$) and a significant consequence x age interaction ($F = 38.18$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .01$) were also obtained. Most importantly, the analysis yielded a significant age x intent x consequence interaction ($F = 3.27$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .05$). Simple effect analyses (Winer, 1971) revealed that only the youngest children made their judgments on the basis of consequences and relied less on intent ($F = 4.05$, $df = 1, 132$, $p < .05$). These results support those of recent investigations in terms of the general developmental trend found. Berg-Cross (1975) discovered that 6-year-olds and Armsby (1971) found that 6-to-8-year-olds based moral judgments on intent information.

Our results suggest that children begin to use intent at a much younger age (i.e., 5.5 years old) than that reported by researchers who employed the complex, ambiguous Piagetian methodology (Boehm, 1962; Grinder, 1964). The reason we found earlier use of intent information most likely is

because of the simplicity and clarity of stories used as well as the nonverbal response format.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Mothers' Responses

There were six ratings provided by the mothers corresponding to their feelings, behavior, and verbalizations when their child demonstrated positive and negative intent. Three separate 3(age) x 2(intent) analyses of variance with repeated measures on the last factor revealed significant age x intent interactions (Feelings-$F = 19.29$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .01$); (Behavior-$F = 4.46$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .05$); (Verbalizations-$F = 18.26$, $df = 2, 69$, $p < .01$). Significant main effects of age and intent also were found in each of the three analyses, but these are interpretable only in terms of the age x intent interactions.

Simple effects analyses (Winer, 1971) revealed that when consequences were negative, mothers responded differentially to the positive intent of children of different ages, but not to the negative intent (Feelings Scores: $F = 19.12$, $df = 2, 138$, $p < .01$; Behavior Scores: $F = 7.67$, $df = 2, 138$, $p < .01$; Verbalization Scores: $F = 15.30$, $df = 2, 138$, $p < .01$).

Mothers of older children more often indicated that when outcomes were negative but their children's intentions were positive, they were more likely to "feel slightly good inside," "smile at their children," and tell them that they were "doing okay." However, when younger children displayed positive intentions which resulted in negative consequences, mothers were more likely to "remain calm," "go on with their work," and "keep quiet about the incident." Regardless of age, when the children's intentions were negative, mothers reported that they got "a little upset inside," "frowned at their children,"

and "told them to straighten up."

Perhaps mothers presume that children as young as 4.5 years of age are not able to make the subtle discrimination between praise for positive intentions and that for negative consequences. That is, mothers may fear that the young children will misinterpret the meaning of their positive responding. The mothers may feel that showing even slight approval for positive intentions which turn out poorly may be misconstrued by the youngsters as legitimizing actions which result in negative consequences, in spite of intent. Thus, a more neutral stance, rather than a favorable one, may appear to be a safer one to adopt with 4.5 year olds.

The results indicated that when negative intentions were displayed, mothers did not make age distinctions when indicating their disfavor. One interpretation of this finding is that the mothers respond primarily to the negative intent and act as if they believe that their children, regardless of age level, have sufficient cognitive ability to comprehend that their disapproval is directed at the negative intentions. However, given the mothers' differential responding to the younger versus older children's positive intentions, it may be unlikely that mothers responded to negative intentions alone. An alternative hypothesis is that the combination of negative intentions and negative consequences together determined their reactions. The data do not allow one to choose between these hypotheses. Obtaining mothers' reactions to all possible pairings of positive and negative intent and consequences may better address this issue. Still another possibility is that mothers' tendency not to take into consideration the developmental level of their child when negative intentions occur is due to an unchecked response of anger or frustration, and not because of mothers' cognitions regarding their child's ability to comprehend social signals.

The Relationship between Mothers's Responses and Children's Judgments

Correlational analyses between (a) what mothers feel, say, and do in negative consequence situations when their children's intent varies and (b) children's judgment scores also were performed.

Children's differential responses to positive versus negative intent in situations resulting in both positive and negative outcomes was determined by obtaining an intent "D-score," where D_1= (PI:PC + PI:NC) - (NI:PC + NI:NC). A second intent D-score was obtained reflecting the children's differential reactions to intent in only negative consequence situations (D_2= PI:NC - NI:NC). Both of these D-scores were strongly related to the mothers' differential responses (D = PI-NI) for the five- and six-year-old groups but not for the four-year-olds (See Table 1 & 2).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

These results lend support to the hypothesis that mothers respond differentially to children at different developmental levels.

Conclusions

The specificity of this relationship between the mothers's reported responses to the intent of their children and their offsprings' abilities to use intent information is important to notice. A bidirectional parent-child influence is likely in that the mothers responded differentially on the basis of their children's developmental level, and the children's use of intent apparently was influenced by their mothers' differential responding to positive and negative intent. A longitudinal study would be necessary to investigate such a bidirectional influence, or to determine if the "age of child" effect is greater or lesser than the "mother" effect. The results of this study should be interpreted with caution since the

mothers' actual behavior was not observed. Examining mothers' actual "real-life" responses in situations in which intent and consequences are varied along the dimensions included in this study may reveal more useful information. Such investigations may refine our understanding of the relationship between parental reactions to intent and consequences in children and their children's developing moral judgment.

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Table 1

Child's Overall D Score (PI-PC + PI-NC) - (NI-PC + NI-NC)

x Mom's D Scores (PI-NI) for Negative Consequences

	Mom Feel D_1	Mom Do D_2	Mom Say D_3
Young	-.08	.355	.215
Middle	.572**	.767**	.801**
Older	.529**	.534**	.393 marginal

**p < .01

Table 2

Child's D Score (PI-NI) for Negative Consequences x

Mom's D Scores (PI-NI) for Negative Consequences

	Mom Feel D_1	Mom Do D_2	Mom Say D_3
Young	.037	.238	.214
Middle	.603**	.760**	.782**
Older	.560**	.592**	.479**

**p < .01

Figure 1

Mean Moral Judgment Score for Each Age Group in Each Experimental Condition